The Conservation Reserve Program at 20

Past Successes and Future Prospects

By Doug Leier

In 2002, for the first time since the 1950s, North Dakota hunters bagged more than 500,000 pheasants. The following two years the number climbed to nearly 600,000, and while 2005 statistics aren't yet finalized, it's possible last fall's rooster harvest will nudge over the top of that 600,000 mark.

It's a mark that would not have been possible without the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program, says Jerry Kobriger, the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's upland game management supervisor, Dickinson.

It's been 20 years since the first seeds of CRP grass were planted in former North Dakota cropland. At the time, no one really knew how popular this large-scale cropland retirement program would become with landowners, or to what extent it would help wildlife. "What we felt was that there was no doubt that it (CRP) would increase the pheasant population," Kobriger recalled, "… and we believed that if the amount of cover went up to what it was during Soil Bank, then the pheasant population would go back up to what it was."

Soil Bank was a previous federal government land retirement program that started in the 1950s and ended in 1964. At its peak, North Dakota had about 2.7 million acres. Currently, North Dakota landowners have more than 3.3 million acres enrolled in CRP.

Indeed, the CRP-era pheasant population did equal and then exceed that of the Soil Bank era, partly because of the additional half-million acres of idle grass, Kobriger said, but mostly because that grass existed during a string of consecutive mild winters in much of the state's pheasant range. Pheasant numbers almost always go up when winters are friendly. Large amounts of idle grasslands on the landscape, however, help accelerate how far, and how fast the growth can occur.

If predictions of similar bird numbers with similar habitat came true, then it stands to reason that the end of the Conservation Reserve Program would likely have an outcome similar to what occurred at the end of Soil Bank in 1965. For the past several years, conservationists, landowners, hunters, biologists, politicians and other concerned citizens have worked diligently to try to prevent history from repeating itself.

Here's why.

The last acres of Soil Bank grasslands were converted back to cropland by the spring of 1965, following a hard winter that would have reduced the state's pheasant population anyway. Hunters bagged nearly 500,000 roosters in 1963; followed by 282,000 in 1964. The harvest in 1965 was just 58,000 and the year after that the Game and Fish Department closed the season.

From close to a half-million pheasants taken in 1963 to no season in 1966. That's what happened during the phasing out of Soil Bank. Some 40 years later it seemed CRP might meet the same fate, as contracts on roughly 2.7 million acres, or about 80 percent of the idled grasslands, were poised to expire by 2009.

New guidelines established several months ago now seem to indicate CRP will not go out in the same all-to-nothing ending as Soil Bank. At the same time, however, it's likely that the next 20 years of CRP will have a somewhat different look than the first 20.

CRP Past

When the first Conservation Reserve Program began in the mid-1980s, it was primarily designed to reduce erosion on highly-erodible cropland, and reduce grain surpluses so commodity prices would increase. Wildlife habitat was a secondary benefit.

Over time, North Dakota landowners put more than 3 million acres into CRP. That's 3 million acres previously planted to wheat, barley or other grains that was planted to grass and left idle for a minimum of 10 years. All that extra grass, typically left to grow all year and only occasionally hayed or grazed, became ideal nesting cover for not only pheasants, but also ducks and many other species of ground-nesting birds.

While North Dakota winters have always limited the state's overall pheasant population, the major influence of CRP grasslands is that they increase carrying capacity. Pheasants can recover more quickly following severe winters because the landscape has better habitat. When winters are mild, as they have been in parts of the state the past several years, the pheasant population can build to higher peaks.

Consider this: North Dakota had several relatively mild winters in the early 1980s. Without CRP or any other long-term land idling program, the pheasant harvest increased from about 60,000 in 1979, following two severe winters, to 141,000 in 1984.

With CRP, hunters bagged about 136,000 roosters in 1997 following the worst winter in three decades. Since then, annual harvest has gradually increased to 600,000.

Without CRP – 60,000 to 141,000 in five years. With CRP – 136,000 to 517,000 in five years.

And that's just for pheasants. Grasslands restored under CRP are an important contributing factor to North Dakota's current record deer population and recent record-breeding duck numbers. In addition, loss of CRP would likely accelerate population declines for several species of songbirds that nest in North Dakota.

It's important to remember that CRP is not the only factor leading to these population increases. Ducks also need water, and for the last decade or more, North Dakota wetland conditions have been excellent. Because of CRP, ducks attracted to that water in spring have a much better chance to bring off a brood in the large expanses of grass, as opposed to mostly fragmented habitat that existed previously.

Like pheasants, deer benefit from mild winters, and even without CRP, deer numbers would likely have increased. The presence of CRP on the landscape, however, allows for a higher deer population than could otherwise exist.

In addition to wildlife benefits, CRP did reduce soil erosion significantly, and helped improve water quality by filtering runoff before it reached lakes and streams. Prices for most commodities grown in North Dakota, however, did not generally improve because of reduced supply, even though nationally landowners enrolled more than 30 million acres that were previously planted to crops.

CRAIG BIHRLE

Large expanses of undisturbed grasslands have benefitted pheasants and other North Dakota wildlife.

CRP Present

Whether CRP lasts another 20 years will be decided by Congress and the president years down the road. The immediate future, however, is much more clear than it was a year ago.

Contracts affecting 1.7 million acres in North Dakota are still set to expire in 2007, but all of those landowners were recently offered a minimum two-year extension. Some landowners will receive invitations to re-enroll for a longer period, depending on how their CRP contract originally ranked under a formula called the Environmental Benefit Index.

Remember, CRP is a voluntary program relying on landowner participation. Landowners who have expiring contracts can decline the extension or re-enrollment offers and break up the sod, or leave the land in grass and use it for hay production or cattle grazing. One thing is certain, change is inevitable.

In North Dakota, the two-year extension was offered to about 5 percent of participating landowners. When those two years are up, the land will likely not qualify for future enrollment, unless we're successful in modifying the current EBI.

Hunters know the benefits of North Dakota being home to more than 3 million acres of CRP.

RON WILSON

Three-year extensions were offered on 8 percent of enrolled acres; 17 percent of enrolled acres were offered four-year extensions, and five-year extensions were offered on 27 percent of enrolled acres. When these extensions have expired, they also will likely not qualify for any further enrollment. When you add together all the contracts expiring in 2007, 2008 and 2009, and factor in the varying lengths of extensions, it appears that by 2014 existing CRP acres will be cut by more than half.

On the flip side, the remaining 40-plus percent of CRP land in North Dakota has been offered longer-term enrollments of either 10 or 15 years. That's certainly a better long-term outlook than the prospect of losing 80 percent of the state's CRP over the next three years.

Will reduced CRP acres in North Dakota create noticeably reduced hunting experiences over the next few years? In some places, probably not, but don't bet the farm on North Dakota maintaining record pheasant hunting in years to come if CRP is cut in half. A severe, prolonged winter, combined with habitat loss, could significantly set back pheasant numbers in parts of the state.

CRP Future

While the future of CRP is clearer than it was a year ago, many questions remain. Perhaps the biggest question relates to how landowners will address their contract extension or re-enrollment offers that went out in mid-March and were due back to the USDA's Farm Service Agency in mid-April.

It will likely be a couple of months before final numbers are available. The unknown is what makes this process so difficult. "The outcome really is in the hands of the producers," says Greg Link, Game and Fish Department assistant wildlife division chief. "Some may presume a shift in CRP with what would appear to be longer re-enrollments and more extensions in the south central and southeastern corner of North Dakota. But will higher commodity prices dictate even less interest in the CRP program?"

One certainty is that most of the long-term 10- and 15-year re-enrollments were offered in the region of North Dakota that lies north and east of the Missouri River. If nothing changes from here on out, southwestern North Dakota will have little CRP after the five-year contract extensions expire. The counties north and east of the Missouri in the area of the state called the Prairie Pothole

Region have the potential to retain much of the CRP that currently exists.

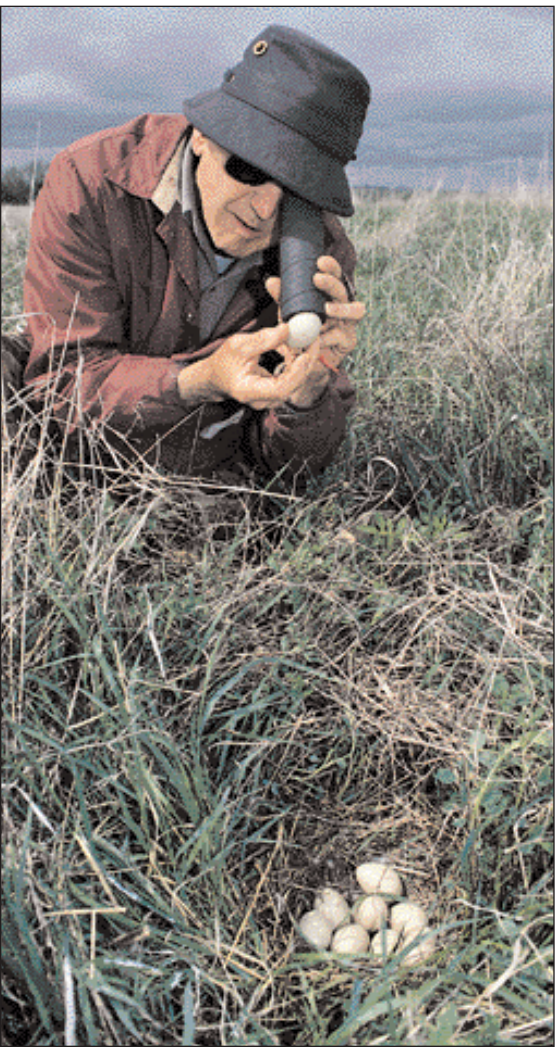
The whole process, Link says, is not over yet. "It seems like a never ending cycle," he said. "We're dealing with issues of CRP contracts for 2006 and already CRP contracts for 2008 and beyond are being discussed."

Add to that the prospect of a new national farm bill in 2007 and more changes could be on the way.

The future of CRP, as it relates to North Dakota wildlife and outdoor recreation, is uncertain. "The changing nature of farm bills makes the process never ending," he said. "With the existing bill, we know what it is and how it works. Any time we undertake a long-term process of adjustments, it's difficult to predict the final outcome."

DOUG LEIER is the Game and Fish Department's outreach biologist for southeastern North Dakota.

Research in North Dakota has shown that duck nests in CRP grasslands are more likely to escape predation than nests in smaller, isolated parcels of grass.



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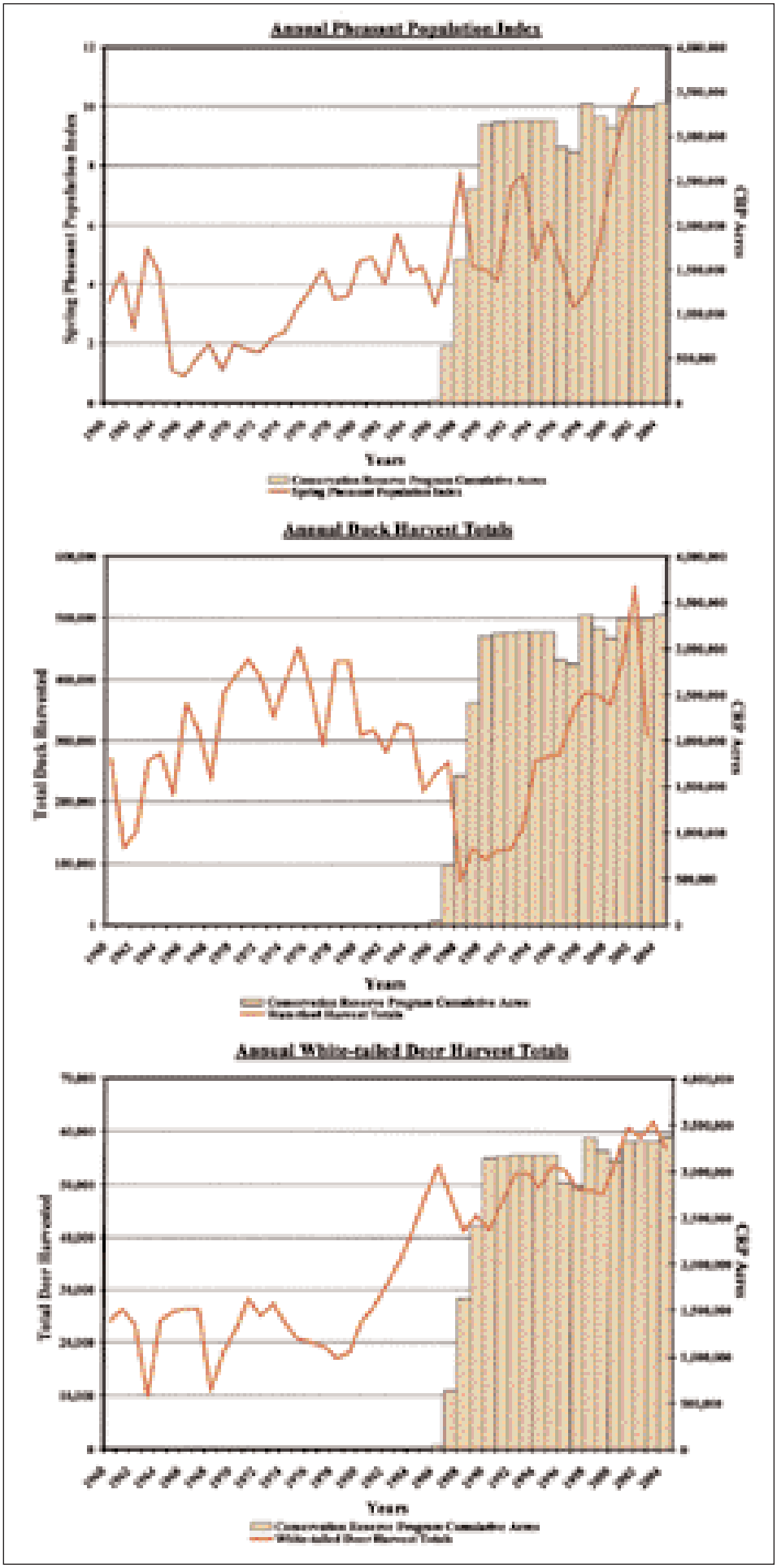

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